



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Cuba

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief within the framework of respect for the law; however, in law and in practice, the Government continued to place restrictions on freedom of religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Overall human rights conditions remained poor in the wake of the Government's jailing of 75 human rights activists and independent journalists in 2003, the biggest such crackdown in more than 2 decades. In general, unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference, harassment, and repression. Some unregistered religious groups were subject to official censure. The Government's policy of permitting apolitical religious activity to take place in government-approved sites remained unchanged. However, citizens worshipping in officially sanctioned churches often were subject to surveillance by state security forces, and the Government's efforts to maintain a strong degree of control over religion continued.

There were some tensions among religions, often because some religious groups perceived others to be too close to the Government. Tension within the Pentecostal movement continued due to the establishment of house churches, which some religious groups believed was divisive.

The U.S. Government raised issues of human rights, including religious discrimination and harassment, with government officials; however, the Government dismissed these concerns. The U.S. Government continued to urge international pressure on the Government to cease its repressive practices.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 68,888 square miles, and its population is approximately 11 million. There is no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious institutions and their membership. A 1953 survey indicated that 93 percent of the population identified themselves as Roman Catholic. According to more recent information from the U.S.-based Puebla Institute, approximately 40 to 45 percent of the population was believed to identify themselves, at least nominally, with the Roman Catholic Church. A significant number of citizens have participated in or practice Santeria, la regla lucumi, and other syncretistic beliefs that are derived from traditional African religions and Roman Catholicism. Some sources estimate that as much as 70 percent of the population practice Santeria or la regla lucumi, which have their roots in West African traditional religions.

The Baptists, represented in four different conventions, are possibly the largest Protestant denomination, followed closely by the Pentecostal churches, particularly the Assemblies of God. Twenty-two denominations, including Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists, are members of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC). Most CCC members are officially recognized by the State, although several, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church, are not registered and are recognized only through their membership in the CCC. Another 31 officially recognized denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses and the small Jewish community, do not belong to the CCC.

Although much of the population is nominally Roman Catholic, since the early 20th century, the country has been heavily influenced by secular attitudes. Catholic Church officials usually estimate that approximately 10 percent of baptized Catholics attend Mass regularly. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 500,000 persons. No figures on the number of Pentecostals are available. Jehovah's Witnesses claim more than 80,000 active members. The Seventh-day Adventists claim approximately 30,000 persons. Prior to 2001, church attendance had grown among some denominations and increased substantially at Catholic Church services following the Pope's visit in 1998. For at least 6 to 8 months after the Pope's visit, attendance was at unusually high levels. Attendance has since stabilized at levels lower than the 1999 peak but remains higher than before the visit.

There are approximately 320 Catholic priests, 40 permanent deacons, and 650 nuns in the country, less than half the total prior to 1960. Overall numbers of Church officials are only slightly higher than before the Papal visit, since most new arrivals replaced retiring priests or those whose time of service in the country had ended.

Foreign missionary groups operate in the country through registered churches.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief within the framework of respect for the law; however, in law and in practice, the Government places restrictions on freedom of religion. The Constitution has provided for the separation of church and state since the early 20th century. In 1992, the Constitution was changed, and references to scientific materialism or atheism were removed. The Government does not favor any particular religion or church; however, the Government appears to be most tolerant of those churches that maintain close relations with the State through the CCC.

The Government requires churches and other religious groups to register with the provincial Registry of Associations within the Ministry of Justice to obtain official recognition. Registration procedures require groups to identify where they will carry out their activities, demonstrate that they have the funding for these activities, and obtain certification from the Registry of Associations that they are not duplicating the activities of a previously registered organization. Registration allows church officials to obtain official permission to travel abroad and receive foreign visitors, receive imported religious literature through the CCC, and meet in officially recognized places of worship. Conversely, members of unregistered religious groups must request exit permits on an individual basis, obtain religious materials through extralegal means, and risk closure of their technically illegal meeting places.

Although no new denominations were registered during the period covered by this report, the Government has tolerated some new religions, such as the Baha'i faith and a small congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). In practice, the Government appears to have halted registration of new denominations; however, no groups were known to have applied for and been denied registration during the period covered by this report.

Along with recognized churches, the Roman Catholic humanitarian organization Caritas, the Masons, human rights groups, and a number of nascent fraternal or professional organizations are the only associations outside the control or influence of the State, the Communist Party, and their mass organizations. The authorities continued to ignore other religious groups' pending applications for legal recognition, thereby subjecting members of such groups to potential charges of illegal association; however, no such charges had been filed by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Government has relaxed restrictions on most officially recognized religious denominations. Jehovah's Witnesses, once considered "active religious enemies of the revolution," are allowed to proselytize quietly door to door and generally are not subject to overt government harassment; however, there continued to be reports of discrimination in schools and the workplace as well as harassment by local Communist Party and government officials. The Government has authorized small assemblies of Jehovah's Witnesses, and in 2003 it allowed a large gathering of approximately 7,000 persons. It has also allowed the opening of a central office in Havana and publication of the group's magazine and other religious literature.

Religious literature and materials must be imported through a registered religious group and can be distributed only to officially recognized religious groups. The CCC controls distribution of Bibles to its members and to other officially recognized denominations. The CCC reported that it has distributed 1.5 million Bibles since 1998. Bibles are distributed among denominations according to the number of members of each church.

Since 1992, the Communist Party has admitted as members persons who openly declare their religious faith.

The Government does not permit religious education in public schools and does not permit the operation of private schools of any kind, including religious schools. The Government has allowed the Catholic Church and Jewish synagogues to offer religious education classes and self-improvement courses on subjects such as computers and foreign languages.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Government led to strong confrontations with institutional churches in the early 1960s. During that period, many church leaders and religious professionals, fearing persecution, left the country. More than 130 Catholic religious workers, including priests, were expelled, and a few served long prison terms. From 1965 to 1967, the Government forced many priests, pastors, and others "who made religion a way of life" into forced labor camps called Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPS), alongside homosexuals, vagrants, and others considered by the regime to be "social scum." The UMAP system ended in 1967; however, over the following 30 years, the Government and the Communist Party systematically discriminated against and marginalized persons who openly professed their faith by excluding them from certain jobs, such as teaching. The Government abandoned its official atheism in the early 1990s; however, by that time most churches had been weakened seriously, and active participation in religious services had fallen drastically.

A 2002 Ministry of the Armed Forces political indoctrination manual describes the Catholic Church as "a decisive instrument for the defense of the colonial and neocolonial regimes that governed our country until the 1959 [revolution]. It is this historical fact which created the conditions for anticlerical sentiment in broad sectors of our society." The same document states that the

Catholic Church has resigned itself to the "triumph of the Revolution" and is now focused on using pastoral work and humanitarian assistance to gain new adherents.

The Government's main interaction with religious denominations is through the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cuban Communist Party. The Ministry of Interior continued to engage in efforts to control and monitor the country's religious institutions, including surveillance, infiltration, and harassment of religious professionals and laypersons. In January 2004, an independent journalist interviewed a former Ministry of Interior official who reported widespread government infiltration of civil and religious organizations. The former official reported that Afro-Caribbean religious groups were even more heavily targeted for infiltration than political opposition organizations. Some estimates state that 70 percent of the population practices these religions in some form, and therefore these groups are seen as a more grassroots "threat" to the power and authority of the Government.

During the period covered by this report, the Government allowed 9 foreign priests and 19 religious workers into the country to replace priests and nuns whose residence permits had expired; however, the applications of 60 additional priests and 130 additional nuns remained pending. The Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) estimates that some applications have been pending for 3 to 4 years, and some names are eventually dropped from the list altogether. A request from the CCCB for the Government to permit 15 Catholic orders to establish a presence, which would greatly expand their capacity for training Catholic seminarians, also was pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

In 2003, the Office of Religious Affairs of the Communist Party advised Pablo Fuentes, a Spanish-national Catholic Priest in Havana Province, that the Government would not extend his authorization to remain in the country. Fuentes left the country in September 2003. Earlier in 2003, authorities revoked authorization for Fuentes to hold a procession to mark the feast day of the patron saint of the town of Managua because Fuentes was "politically unreliable," apparently because his religious activities were too visible and therefore were considered controversial by the Government. Following Fuentes' departure from the country, the town of Managua was permitted to hold the procession marking the feast day of the patron saint of Managua in 2004.

Government officials criticized the Catholic Church for refusing to register church and lay group publications with the Ministry of Culture, as required by law of all publications. The CCCB indicated that the Church has declined to register because registration would force it to concede control to the State regarding the content and format of Church publications.

Several Catholic diocese and lay groups publish magazines, including Palabra Nueva of the Archdiocese of Havana and Vitral of the Diocese of Pinar del Rio. The publications are not registered with the Ministry of Culture, as required by law. The Government has not blocked printing or distribution of Catholic magazines; however, the State impedes access to printing equipment by making equipment too costly or placing restrictions on sales. The Government has accused the editor of one religious magazine of subversive behavior for writing about sensitive political and social issues.

In January 2005, the Catholic alternative magazine Espacios ceased publishing. The publishers claimed they had run out of funding and lost local support, but there were rumors that they had succumbed to government pressure regarding the magazine's content. Former Espacios Director Joaquin Bello informed the press that Cardinal Jaime Ortega told him the Church wanted a publication that focused more on events in the religious community and less on socio-political issues.

The law allows for the construction of new churches once the required permits are obtained; however, the Government rarely has authorized construction permits, forcing many churches to seek permits to meet in private homes. Most registered religious groups are granted permission to hold services in private homes. Religious groups also must obtain a permit if they wish to reconstruct and repair existing places of worship. The process of obtaining a permit and purchasing construction materials from government outlets is lengthy and expensive.

The Government does not allow the Catholic Church access to public media, but after the death of Pope John Paul II in April 2005, authorities allowed Archbishop Jaime Ortega to address the nation via a taped message. Fidel Castro mentioned the Pope in a positive vein in several speeches and emphasized the late Pope's anti-consumerism and anti-embargo stances; however, Castro failed to note the Pontiff's anti communist beliefs.

In November 2004, a delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church visited the country to consecrate the first Russian Orthodox temple in the country. Government media also cast this event as evidence of the Government's religious tolerance.

In January 2004, Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Fidel Castro presided over the consecration in Havana of a church for the small Greek Orthodox community, an event that the government media cast as evidence of the Government's religious tolerance. A government website used a news report covering Patriarch Bartholomew's visit as "proof" that Amnesty International's criticism of religious restrictions was a "lie."

Government authorities apparently continued to believe that religious organizations, through their charitable work, undermined the authority of the Communist Party. In November 2004, authorities closed a free day-care center in the Baptist Church of Camajuani, accusing the pastor of inculcating the children with religious ideas that went against the Revolution and claiming the facilities' hygienic conditions were substandard. The authorities then opened a competing facility, which charges parents for its services, 100 yards from the church.

Religious officials are allowed to visit prisoners; however, prison officials sometimes refused visits to certain political prisoners. For a religious visit to take place, the prisoner must submit a written request, and the prison director must grant approval. Some prisoners reported that prison officials ignored repeated written requests for religious visits. In punishment cells, prisoners were denied access to reading materials, including Bibles. Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello, a political prisoner released in July 2004, reported that prison authorities denied her access to religious workers during her entire 16 month incarceration. She also stated that prison authorities offered religious services to common prisoners but threatened prisoners who exercised this right with denial of privileges, such as visits and correspondence.

The Government continued to enforce a regulation that prevents any Cuban or joint enterprise (except those with specific authorization) from selling computers, facsimile machines, photocopiers, or other equipment to a church at other than the official--and exorbitant--retail price. Additionally, the Government denies access to the Internet to some religious groups that it deems unreliable. The Government controls the Internet and any group seeking legal access is subject to its controls. The Catholic Church has asked the Government for the past 6 years for permission to have Internet access; however, at the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had not granted the Church's request.

Members of the armed forces do not attend religious services in uniform, probably to avoid possible reprimand by superiors.

Education is secular, and no religious educational institutions are allowed. Religious instruction in public schools is not permitted.

Churches provide religious education classes to their members. Catholic Church officials report that the number of children attending catechism classes has continued to drop, mostly because of other activities, usually scheduled by local school authorities. There have been no reports of parents being restricted from teaching religion to their children.

In September 2004, members of the First Bethany Baptist Church of Moa, in the Province of Holguin, ended a 74-day hunger strike and sit-in. After 15 years of denying the group's request, the Government had finally granted permission to renovate the church. Before the work was completed, the Government threatened to take over the facility because the renovation was too "opulent" and "stood out" among the decrepit buildings nearby. The Government allowed the work to continue only after more than 900 members protested against the Government's plan.

Church officials have reported cases of religious persons experiencing discrimination because of ignorance or personal prejudice by a local official. Religious persons encounter employment problems in certain professions, such as education. In January 2005, Ismari de Armas, a member of Jehovah's Witnesses from Pinar del Rio, was told she was denied employment in a state-run factory because she was "untrustworthy" due to her religious beliefs.

Religious groups are required to submit a request to the local ruling official of the Communist Party before being allowed to hold processions or events outside of religious buildings. In September 2004, the Government permitted for the seventh consecutive year a procession in connection with Masses in celebration of the feast day of Our Lady of Charity in Havana. A number of religious and other activists participated in the procession. The authorities permitted approximately 50 processions nationwide to mark the feast day of Our Lady of Charity but denied permission to more than a dozen others because they were deemed to be more politically and socially vocal and therefore were not in line with government policy. The Catholic Church has decided to stop requesting permits for processions in areas where they historically have not been permitted.

There were smaller, local processions throughout the provinces during the period covered by this report. In December 2004, for the fourth consecutive year, authorities allowed several evangelical denominations to celebrate a full-day public Christmas program in Santa Clara. The authorities did not allow the organizations to post public signs or announce the celebration on the radio or television. However, in May 2004, authorities forcefully broke up an unauthorized procession of more than 500 persons in the town of Banes, Province of Holguin, which had formed to accompany the image of the Sacred Heart.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government monitors all religious groups, including registered and established institutions. The authorities also monitor church-run publications. Government harassment of private houses of worship continued, with evangelical denominations reporting evictions from houses used for worship. According to CCC officials, most of the private houses of worship closed were unregistered, making them technically illegal. In February 2005, the Government fined members of a Pentecostal congregation in Managua \$24 (600 pesos, twice the average Cuban's monthly salary) for worshipping in a structure built without a permit and threatened to demolish the "illegal" structure. The group had been worshipping at the site for more than 14 years.

The Ministry of the Interior continued to engage in efforts to control and monitor religious activities and to use surveillance, infiltration, and harassment against religious groups, religious professionals, and lay persons. There were continued reports that local Communist Party and government officials harassed members of Jehovah's Witnesses; however, church officials reported that the number of such incidents decreased.

State security officials visited some priests and pastors prior to significant religious events, ostensibly to warn them that dissidents were trying to "use the church"; however, some critics claimed that these visits were conducted in an effort to foster mistrust between the churches and human rights or pro-democracy activists. During the period covered by this report, state security agents warned the wives of several political prisoners that they would be arrested if they joined other wives of political

prisoners for Mass at Havana's Santa Rita Catholic Church. Ministry of the Interior officers reportedly sat near spouses of political prisoners during Mass to intimidate them. Some of the wives continued to attend Mass together on a weekly basis but said they feared government retaliation against them or against their jailed husbands. In many churches, most noticeably at Santa Rita's, the CCCB indicated that a high number of state security agents continued to attend Mass for the purpose of intimidating spouses of political prisoners. There also were reports that prison officials continued to change the dates and times that wives could telephone their spouses to Sunday morning, thereby forcing the spouses to choose between speaking with their spouses or attending Mass.

In April 2005, Miguel David Tejeda Tenorio of the First Baptist Church of Santa Clara reported that officials from the Office of Religious Affairs of the PCC pressured his pastor to remove Tejeda from his congregation for his political opposition activities.

Also in April 2005, the Council of the Church of Christ in Villa Clara closed the church in Jose Marti Subdivision and prohibited the pastor, Edelton Villa y Luis Pedraza, from preaching because Villa's wife, Rosario Irene Barata, had met regularly with anti-government opposition groups.

In 2000, a leading editor of one of the Catholic Church's magazines was criticized in a major editorial of the Communist Party's newspaper as a "known counter-revolutionary." In April 2003, the Government described the same Catholic Church magazine as "subversive literature" during the summary trials of 75 political prisoners arrested in March 2003. When the editor traveled to the United States and Europe in November 2004, government officials suggested he might not be allowed to return; however, they did not carry out the threat.

Since 1980, the First Baptist Church of Santa Clara has been allowed to hold bank accounts in hard currency. In 2002, the funds were restricted to use in reconstruction projects. In October 2004, authorities denied the church's application to keep these bank accounts and forced the church to conduct all monetary transactions through the Association of Baptist Conventions of Western Cuba, which is under the control of the Government.

There were reports that independent Santeria priests were pressured to join the government-sanctioned Yoruba Cultural Association.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses By Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Most persons who identify themselves as religious define themselves as Roman Catholic, although few attend Mass regularly. Catholicism has remained a major cultural reference since colonial times. After almost 50 years of the current regime, societal attitudes, including those toward religion, are conditioned heavily by the attitude of Fidel Castro and other government and ruling party leaders. The Government's decision to allow, and even provide some support for, the 1998 Papal visit greatly boosted the public perception that espousing religious faith was again acceptable. Fidel Castro further cemented this view, most importantly among Communist Party adherents and government officials, in nationally televised and broadcast speeches in which he claimed disingenuously that the Cuban Revolution had "never" persecuted religious believers.

There were some tensions among religions, often because some religious groups perceived others to be too close to the Government. Tension within the Pentecostal movement continued due to the establishment of house churches, which some churches believed was divisive, and resulted in government action against Pentecostal worshippers. In addition, Pentecostal members of the CCC have complained that the preaching activities of unauthorized foreign missionaries have led some of the members of their churches to establish new denominations without obtaining the required permits.

In June 2004, evangelical pastor Obet Matos Rodriguez claimed unknown persons had thrown eggs at his home and written derogatory graffiti on his walls.

The CCC is the only ecumenical body that is recognized by the Government. It comprises many Protestant, including Pentecostal, denominations and engages in dialogue with the Catholic Church and the Jewish community. The CCC and the Government generally have a mutually supportive relationship.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. Government policy toward the country is to promote a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy and respect for human rights, including religious freedom, and the U.S. Government encourages the development of civil society, which includes the strengthening of religious institutions. The U.S. Interests Section in Havana continued to maintain regular contact with the various religious leaders and communities and support nongovernmental organization initiatives that aid religious groups. The U.S. Government regularly sought to facilitate travel to and from the country by religious persons as well as delivery of donated goods and materials that in some cases were provided to religious institutions. The U.S. Interests Section continued to raise issues of human rights, including religious discrimination and harassment, with government officials; however, the Government dismissed these concerns. As in the past, the U.S. Government continuously urged international pressure on the Government to cease its repressive practices, including religious discrimination and harassment.

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